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CIA Officer Charged With Selling Secrets

Wife Also Accused; Breach Described As 'Very Serious'

By Bill Miller and Michael Isikoff
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A CIA counterintelligence officer and his wife were charged yesterday with turning over top-secret documents to the Soviet Union and later to Russia in what authorities described as one of the most damaging espionage cases in years.

Aldrich Hazen Ames, 52, had been paid more than $1.5 million since 1985 for his work as a double agent, federal authorities said—nearly five times what he was paid during that time as a CIA officer. He and his Colombian-born wife, Maria Del Rosario Casas Ames, 41, lived lavishly, buying a $540,000 house in Arlington, a 1992 Jaguar and a farm and condominiums in Colombia, investigators said.

In court papers, authorities painted a picture of a trusted career CIA agent who sold secrets about the agency's operation and agents, including a Russian KGB officer who had been aiding the CIA. Long after the Cold War was over, the spy games continued, investigators said.

In Washington and suburban neighborhoods, there was an elaborate cat-and-mouse game involving Ames, his Russian handlers and suspicious U.S. officials, court papers said. On one occasion, Ames allegedly left a chalk mark on an outdoor mailbox at 37th and R streets in Northwest Washington signaling he wanted to meet with Russian agents, and he allegedly left material to be picked up across the Washington area.

Meanwhile, the FBI was shadowing Ames and his wife, a graduate student at Georgetown University and former paid CIA source in Mexico City. Agents tapped his phone and monitored his home computer and North Arlington house. His office and home were searched, and at least twice agents rummaged through the couple's household trash.

Federal intelligence and law enforcement officials said yesterday that Ames had access to virtually all information about U.S. intelligence activities within the Soviet Union during the late 1980s.

See AMES, A12, Col. 1

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE PHOTOS

In a 10-month probe, Aldrich Hazen Ames, 52, left, and his wife, Maria Del Rosario Casas Ames, 41, above, were followed by FBI agents who also tapped the couple's phone and monitored the computer in their North Arlington house. Authorities said Aldrich Ames had access to virtually all information about U.S. intelligence activities in the Soviet Union during the late 1980s.

Couple Charged in Espionage Case

AMES, From A1

He specialized for many years in that region for the CIA, and he once headed the Soviet branch of the CIA's counterintelligence group.

"How serious can you get?" commented one official, noting that Ames is believed to have compromised more than a half-dozen Soviet agents recruited by the CIA during his years on the Soviet and Russian payrolls.

A Justice Department official declined to confirm the number but agreed yesterday that the "human assets aspect of this is very serious." According to the official, Ames "exposed and rendered useless" several U.S. spies. Officials declined to say whether any of the agents have been killed as a result of Ames's information.

Equally significant, officials said, was Ames's role as one of the debriefers who handled Vitaly Yurchenko, a KGB colonel and counterintelligence official who defected in August 1985 and then changed his mind three months later.

Sources yesterday provided few details about Ames's role in the case of Yurchenko, who served in a high-ranking position in the KGB department responsible for intelligence operations against the United States and Canada. But they said his involvement with debriefing the former KGB official raised the prospect that all of the information Yurchenko was providing the CIA about Soviet espionage operations was immediately being fed back to the Soviets.

The White House issued a statement saying President Clinton "views this as a very serious case involving our national security." The statement said Clinton has ordered National Security Adviser Anthony Lake, CIA Director R. James Woolsey and others to examine the case's national security implications.

Ames and his wife each were arraigned yesterday at U.S. Magistrate Court in Alexandria on a charge of conspiracy to commit espionage. Ames was arrested late Monday morning as he walked near his home in the 2500 block of Randolph Street. His wife, who goes by the name Rosario and is working on a doctorate in philosophy, was arrested later at their home. Authorities said she was involved in the planning and sometimes accompanied her husband to drop off documents.

At the urging of prosecutors, a judge ordered them held without bond and froze their assets, including a dozen bank accounts in the United States, Switzerland, Italy and Colombia. Both face life in prison and $250,000 fines if convicted.

The couple was charged after a 10-month FBI investigation, which Clinton was told about.

In 31 years with the CIA, Ames has had "Top Secret" security clearances and myriad assignments in Washington, New York, Turkey, Mexico and Italy. He currently is an operations officer in the CIA's counter-narcotics center at the agency's headquarters in Langley.

Ames headed the Soviet counterintelligence branch in Washington from 1983 to 1985. In that assignment, he was supposed to get information from the Soviets and recruit Soviet intelligence officers and other officials to the U.S. side. In March 1984, Ames was given authorization to begin cultivating sources at the Soviet Embassy. During the next year, however, Ames switched sides and began sharing U.S. secrets with the Soviets, authorities said.

The FBI first became suspicious of a potential "mole" within the CIA as early as 1985, when intelligence operations involving the Soviets began to go awry, law enforcement officials said. But the bureau's investigation did not start to develop until about two years ago, when officials concluded that there were "too many things happening to accept as coincidence," one official said. Shortly thereafter, the FBI received an outside tip that helped point the bureau to Ames, the officials said.

The investigation intensified last summer when FBI agents began following Ames and his wife. They reviewed the couple's financial transactions, culled airline records, gathered credit card and other receipts and eventually wiretapped the couple's telephone and listened to conversations in their home.

In the monitoring of Ames's home computer, authorities copied a document dated June 8, 1992, described as a pitch to the Russians for more cash, the FBI said. It included this passage:

"My most immediate need, as I pointed out in March, is money. . . . Now, I am faced with the need to cash in investments to meet current needs—a very tight and unpleasant situation! . . . Therefore, I will need as much cash delivered in Pipe as you think can be accommodated—it seems to me that it could accommodate up to $100,000." "Pipe" was a code name for a designated drop-off point for cash, the FBI said.

Besides delivering packages in the Washington area, Ames allegedly met with his Russian handlers in October 1992 in Caracas, Venezuela, and again last November in Bogota, Colombia. Court papers said $86,700 was deposited into Ames's bank accounts in the weeks after the Caracas trip, and another $21,600 was deposited shortly after the trip to Bogota. The FBI found a typewriter ribbon in Ames's trash that contained plans about the Venezuelan trip, the court papers said.

FBI SURVEILLANCE PHOTO

ALDRICH HAZEN AMES

. . . charged after 10-month probe

Neighbors said yesterday that the Ameses appeared to be among the more affluent residents on their quiet, wooded side street. Several said they assumed the couple, who have a young son, had family money. According to court papers, the Ameses spent nearly $1.4 million from April 1985 through last November on expenses that included $455,000 in credit card bills alone.

"They obviously had a lot of cash," said Willian Rhoads, a neighbor who said he was stunned by the arrest.

Staff writes Steve Bates and Charles W. Hall contributed to this report.